

STRAITS SETTLEMENTS.—EDUCATION REPORT.

WE have before us an interesting report on the education given in Singapore and the other Straits Settlements to the mixed population of Malays and Chinese. It is drawn up by Mr. Allan Skinner, the Inspector of Schools, and, together with some other papers, has been lately laid before the Legislative Council by the command of his Excellency the Governor. It is curious to find in the Eastern Peninsula so many of the hindrances to a national system of education with which we are only too familiar here. Birmingham has exported to barbarous countries a great deal of spurious articles of manufacture. Unhappily, there was no need for it to export a Brummagem religious difficulty. Besides this religious difficulty, to which we shall have to return, Mr. Skinner finds the same social difficulties as trouble our school managers. The schools sometimes are not near enough to the homes of the children. To quote the words of the report, "The habits and the laziness of the people proved an insuperable bar to the development of what may be called central schools with well-paid teachers, for the children of Sungei Duraka would not attend at Permatang Pow, and both parents and children at Telok Ayer Tawar refused to have anything to do with the Penagu schools, though neither of these distances is beyond two miles. They say they must be at home for meals, and will not walk this distance every day." Mr. Skinner perhaps scarcely remembers of what these children are made, nor, while he has the vigour of England still upon him, does he consider how very close they are to the line. At the date of inspection of one school he found that many of the boys had gone off to the great Mohurru festival, while others—less fortunate—were engaged in the fields getting in the paddy harvest. In another school the boys could not wait for inspection because it was raining and the schoolroom was almost roofless, while the general apathy was so great that Mr. Skinner says the children must be coaxed into regular attendance. The school festival, that reward of virtue, is evidently as much required in the tropics as in colder latitudes. In one respect our Straits Settlements would seem to be the very paradise of schoolboys, for we read that "at present it is not the boys so much as the teachers who are truants."

Though a considerable sum—scarcely less than £5,000 a year—is spent by the Government on these schools, the result obtained is most unsatisfactory. "Out of 91,000 children some 3,500 are known to be receiving education, and probably about as many more attend native schools, the latter almost entirely Chinese. The education is throughout primary, and there are not more than twenty pupils in all our schools who have advanced with any proficiency beyond reading, writing (from dictation), and arithmetic." One of the schools—the Raffles Institute—was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles as a Malayan college. His chief objects were "to educate the sons of the higher order of natives and others," and "to collect the scattered literature and traditions of the country." The result is miserable when compared with the high aims of the great founder. Out of the 386 students at the Institute, there are only thirteen Malays. How many of these thirteen, if, indeed, any, belong to the learned and most select twenty whom we have mentioned above we are not told. In the same institute is a class for teaching the Chinese language. But of this class "only one boy really understands anything about his studies; the rest had merely learned their lessons by rote, and

were not able to tell the meanings of the same characters if found out of the pages they studied." In many of the schools where English is taught the result obtained is scarcely more satisfactory. "The Strait-born teachers," Mr. Skinner reports, "frequently labour under the disadvantage of being themselves unfamiliar with English. In some cases it is worse—there is downright ignorance of the language. I was lately addressed by one whose salary is upwards of £50 as follows:—'I beg to inform to call for your consideration Concerning the former Schoolmaster's House on the left side of the present School was in a state of useless and rotten.'" Under such teachers as these we are not surprised to learn that the boys are taught "to read fluently before they understand a word of what they are reading." In fact, the learning of the pupil is as useless and rotten as the schoolmaster's house. Bad as such a kind of education would be anywhere, it is doubly bad for the Chinese boy "with his dangerous aptitude for rote-work." They are willing, it would seem, to learn off anything by heart if only their masters would spare them the trouble of understanding. They delight in rules as much as they dislike reasons. Badly as English and Chinese are taught, the instruction in Arabic is, if possible, worse. The Malays are strict Mahomedans, and will have their children taught the Koran. It is not, however, to schools aided by a Government grant that for the most part they send them for religious instruction. In most of the villages there are religious instructors who are paid by the parents. What is learnt, however, is altogether worthless, as neither master nor pupils understand the words repeated. "Notwithstanding their constant practice and repetition most of the boys follow the Arabic by memory rather than by the letters before them; and even the best scholars admit their entire ignorance of any meaning in the words. How far," Mr. Skinner goes on to add, "such a training as this is removed from a real education may be judged by their own standard; for, although well able to recite the Koran, a Malay confesses himself 'bodoh' or ignorant unless he can write Malay, in which case he would, on the contrary, be styled 'pandit' or educated, and become one of a small number equally well taught." It is some satisfaction to find a country where a knowledge of handwriting ranks above dogmatic theology. In many of the schools the children have to study the Koran for four hours every day. Can we be surprised that in a country where the poor little wretches are penned up every day for four long hours learning a set of words which to them have no meaning, the people have in a wild outburst of impatience invented the art of running a-muck? In the superstitious reverence that the Malays attach even to the Arabic characters there is one great advantage. They have such a sanctity about them that "any language written with them may be taught in the mosque itself, or in the reading place adjoining it, or wherever the Koran may be read, while the instruction in English in such places will be denied, and master and pupil will, until there are Government schoolrooms, be forced into dismal hovels." While the Malays will have their children learn the Koran, there are English, French, and Portuguese missions, Protestant and Catholic, bent on teaching them Christianity. As we have said before, the result hitherto has been miserable. We hope, however, that Mr. Skinner's admirable suggestions will be carried out, and that the Pandies, before very many years are past, will be as numerous as the Bodohs. The first thing, he says, is to teach Malay boys their own language, and to open good village schools. "Fortunately," he says, "the foundations of such schools are already prepared; for the boys who now assemble in most of the villages will be the pupils, the hadjee or khatib who teaches them will be the master, and the mosque will serve for the schoolroom." For the secular instruction which this learned man will now give, he will be paid by Government. It seems that an addition of five or six dollars to the income he already gets will quite content the teacher, while Mr. Skinner, paying by results, proposes to fix as a maximum addition the magnificent sum of ten dollars. If in any village there is no hadjee, then if "there are sufficient numbers and the parents are so far in earnest as to forward a list of at least twenty boys willing to attend, they should be allowed to choose a teacher and start a school; for restrictions upon the opening of new ones will have the worst effect." In time the people may get to value more highly the instruction in matters which they can understand, and to set less account on the Koran, written as it is in a tongue not understood of the common people. Mr. Skinner, unlike some of the agitators in our own country, begins the education of prejudiced people by remembering that they are prejudiced. They insist on having the Koran taught, or nothing at all. He does not interfere with their Koran teaching, but he arranges for other teaching besides. They will not have their mosques profaned by secular teaching. He proposes to have secular knowledge made worthy of the mosque by the sacred Arabic characters in which it shall be imparted. They are jealous in their villages of foreign interference. He leaves it to themselves to select their own masters, and only steps in to give encouragement by extra payment for extra exertions.